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The Transformation of the Pope: The Agony and The Ecstasy (1965) and The Second Vatican Council (1962-65)

Abstract

In 1965 the film *The Agony and The Ecstasy* (dir. Carol Reed) presented Renaissance artistic culture, Catholic iconography, and the papal court in Rome to a popular, broad, and non-denominational audience. Based on the novel by Irving Stone (1961), the narrative follows Michelangelo and Pope Julius II through the decoration of the Sistine chapel ceiling (1508-12), outlining a relationship between the two protagonists that suggests some spiritual equality. In the same way that the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) strove for spiritual renewal and an emphasis on the wonder of humankind's relationship with God, *The Agony and The Ecstasy* portrays the Sistine chapel ceiling as a non-denominational emblem of hope that had the power to transform even the pope. The transformation of Pope Julius from an institutionally focused authoritarian into a more humble and spiritual man coincided with the North American media's embrace of Pope John XXIII and Paul VI's more ecumenical overtones.

Keywords

Papacy, Second Vatican Council, The Agony and The Ecstasy, Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo, Pope Julius II, Catholic Imagination

Author Notes

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In October 1965 Bosley Crowther, a film critic for *The New York Times*, was notably underwhelmed by Carol Reed's cinema version of *The Agony and The Ecstasy*. The ponderous quality of the film prompted Crowther to write that Reed had produced "not a strong and soaring drama but an illustrated lecture on a slow artist at work."¹ Beyond his impatience with the film's pace, Crowther was disappointed with the "arrogant, agonized and cranky" artist Michelangelo played by Charlton Heston, and the "interesting, quizzical" Pope Julius II (r. 1503-13) played by Rex Harrison. Crowther's brief review focused mainly on the quality of the actors and the script, ignoring the greater issues of historical presentation and the film's place in current events.

Perhaps most interestingly, Crowther's review assumed that his North American reader had a basic understanding of Renaissance art and Catholic culture. In 1965 Crowther was writing before most middle-class Americans had access to cheap trans-Atlantic flights and they were unlikely to have extensive knowledge of Italian art or history.² Pointedly Crowther does not identify *The Agony and The Ecstasy* as a particularly Catholic story, but as a "pseudo-personal drama," noting that the relationship between "the proud man" (Pope Julius II) and "the great man" (Michelangelo) occupies the film's central focus.³ Undoubtedly, part of this assumption of familiarity stemmed from the popularity of Irving Stone's novel of the same name, which chronicles Michelangelo's decoration of the Sistine Chapel ceiling from 1508-12. First appearing in print in 1961, *The*

Agony and The Ecstasy sold over 50 million copies and to Twentieth Century Fox Studios surely seemed to be an excellent investment.⁴ However, the film itself grossed only \$4 million in the United States, and Crowther's judgement has overshadowed the film's efforts to present a famous work of art in historical context.⁵ On the whole scholars have ignored *The Agony and The Ecstasy*, relegating it to the subgenre of "art biopic" and passing over the fact that a film about painting a ceiling at the Vatican Palace coincided with the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

This article situates the film *The Agony and The Ecstasy* amid the aims of the Second Vatican Council and the changing vision of Catholicism and the papacy in the mid-twentieth century. The film particularly focuses on the transformation of the pope under the influence of Michelangelo's fresco *The Creation of Adam*, which reveals the spiritual divide between the artist and the pope that acts as the foundation of their personal conflicts. While the pope dealt with the politics, finances, and authority of the institutional Church, Michelangelo focused on the love and hope that he saw in the Christian God's making of humankind. Over the course of the film Pope Julius becomes more preoccupied with this kinder divine vision and slowly adopts a similar tone with Michelangelo, a man with whom he had previously come to blows. The transformation of Pope Julius in *The Agony and The Ecstasy* mirrors on film the transformation of the papacy that occurred following the announcement of the Second Vatican Council

in 1959. As the “prisoner in the Vatican,” who refused to travel outside the Vatican Palace until 1929, and outside of Italy until 1964, the pope had publicly rejected the unification of Italy (1871) and the loss of the Papal States. To the world outside Rome the pope had become imprisoned in a public character that focused solely on the papacy’s dogmatic instructions, loss of institutional power, and disapproval of the modern world.⁶

Moreover, whether the Catholic Church recognized it or not, the opening of the film in October 1965, during the final session of the Second Vatican Council, set an unmistakable tone for Catholic *aperturismo* (openness) and the accessibility of both the pope and Catholic culture. The film dramatized the decoration of the most famous ceiling in the world, which became not a lesson in Catholic art history, but a clash of personalities that revealed the divinity of artistic inspiration and the universal awe of beauty and creation. The reconciliation between the artist Michelangelo and his patron the Pope, grounded in appreciation of artistic genius and man’s potential, established the fresco as a site for emotions that transcended Catholicism and reached out to people of all faiths attempting to change their vision of the pope as an authoritarian and antiquated leader. In the same fashion, the Second Vatican Council sought to open the Catholic Church to the modern world, and through unprecedented dialogue build bridges that emphasized human unity, rather than denominational separatism. The public character of the Council’s successive popes, John XXIII (r.

1958-63) and Paul VI (r. 1963-78), was key to this transformation as were the latter's much-publicized travels.

The Agony and The Ecstasy (1965)

As historians have noted, the Second Vatican Council encouraged a more harmonious relationship between the Catholic Church and both print and broadcast media. However, in North America there was already a profitable and popular relationship between filmmakers and Catholic stories best remembered in Bing Crosby's portrayal of Father O'Malley in the films *Going My Way* (1944) and *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945). As a respected and publicly Catholic actor, Bing Crosby's fame coincided with a public recognition of the growth in the Catholic population in the United States and a rise in the average income of Catholic households.⁷ More importantly, for non-Catholics these films "present a Catholicism that is demystified and Americanized," with priests that could be fashionable and fun, interested equally in baseball and in celebrating mass.⁸ Father O'Malley rarely engages in any theological debate or Catholic liturgical acts, preferring to encourage feelings of social responsibility and community. The popularity of these movies hinged on the positioning of Crosby's character as a young priest charged with modernizing a parish under the leadership of a more

traditional elderly cleric (Barry Fitzgerald as Father Fitzgibbon) or in opposition to challenges (financial) that spanned religions.⁹

The conflicts encountered by Father O'Malley showed the presence of youth and the effect of change on an institution, the Catholic Church, that was characterized popularly by allegiance to an authority that had changed very little since the Middle Ages. The effect of Father O'Malley's gentle triumphs, whether over his stubborn predecessor or over financial exigency, was to show the evolution and updating of the Catholic Church. This fictional, yet clearly American environment both familiarized Catholic practices to the wider cinema-going public and suggested that such change was already happening at home.¹⁰ The continued popularity of these films and the themes of change and communal goodwill associated with their Catholic characters prepared North American audiences for the presentation of more elite Catholic characters and foreign environments by Irving Stone in 1961 that nonetheless boiled down to an understandable clash of old and new cultures.

In addition to films popularized by Catholic characters in Catholic settings (schools, churches, parishes, and convents), the 1950s was the decade of the biblical epic. The director and producer Cecil B. DeMille argued that in a variety of ways the ancient world and its conflicts that contextualized this type of film were intrinsically familiar to North American audiences, who were predominantly Judeo-Christian. Famously, DeMille described his film *The Ten Commandments*

as a picture with “two thousand years’ advance publicity.”¹¹ Although DeMille was not involved in the production of *The Agony and The Ecstasy*, he did set the stage for it with other historical films with religious overtones or clear biblical narratives. As a producer, he shepherded *Samson and Delilah* (1949) and *The Ten Commandments* (1956) into theatres, both of which dramatized Old Testament narratives. Both films were commercial successes, and the latter formed Charlton Heston as the quintessential patriarchal hero in the North American consciousness.¹² Heston represented the “flip side” of DeMille’s combination for success in epic films: “biblical sex and biblical spectacle.” These epic films hinged on the creation of biblical or ancient heroes, like Heston’s Moses or Kirk Douglas’ Spartacus (in Stanley Kubrick’s 1960 film), who objected to the crimes and debauchery that attracted cinema audiences.¹³ Heston would go on to star as Judah Ben-Hur in the eponymous film (1959), securing through his on-screen roles a public character that many viewers closely associated with the historical characters that he portrayed and the moral values that these characters espoused.¹⁴ Thus, Heston’s involvement in *The Agony and The Ecstasy* brought a deeper resonance to the personal struggle between the pope and Michelangelo, endowing the artist’s spiritual vision with a divinity that recalled Judah Ben-Hur’s encounter with Jesus and Moses’ conversation with the burning bush.

Using Heston's artistic persona as a symbol of deep spirituality, the film *The Agony and The Ecstasy* presents itself as an emblem of the evolving nature of Catholicism. The struggle of Michelangelo to paint according to his soul's desire, and in opposition to Pope Julius' traditional program of the Twelve Apostles that visualized Christian historical authority, presented a model of Christianity that was not bound by tradition but was still holy, worshipful of the divine, and beautiful in the eyes of the Church. In one part of the ceiling, the *Creation of Adam*, Heston's Michelangelo reveals the worth of Christian spiritualism found outside of theology, by de-emphasizing hierarchy, and celebrating the bond between the laity and the Creator. As in both his characters in *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben-Hur*, Heston's Michelangelo focuses on the individual in opposition to the demands of the institutional authority, in this case the pope his patron.

Where Charlton Heston brought echoes of individualism and religiosity to his portrayal of Michelangelo, as Pope Julius II, Rex Harrison was immediately recognizable, having played Julius Caesar in *Cleopatra* (1963) and Professor Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady* (1964). Both roles had endowed Harrison with authority over other characters, whether politically (*Cleopatra*) or socially and intellectually (*Eliza Doolittle*). *The Agony and The Ecstasy* would begin with a similar dynamic of Harrison as a demanding and authoritarian Pope Julius who ultimately bends in awe of Michelangelo's spiritual vision. The polarity between

the previous roles played by Heston and Harrison echoes the personalities and the combative position of their characters in this film.

On the film's surface this conflict between the artist and the pope concerns the issue of dignity, both professional and individual. The anti-social and temperamental artist Michelangelo believed that his patron should respect the artist's dignity as a professional, and wait until the project was completed to the artist's satisfaction. Michelangelo's concept of professional respect is at odds with the medieval and early modern understanding of the artist as a craftsman, who deployed his skills to the satisfaction of the patron.¹⁵ In his interactions with the artist, Pope Julius repeatedly emphasized his own superior dignity as Michelangelo's patron, financier, and also as his social superior. Not only was the pope the leader of all Christendom, and thus Michelangelo's spiritual authority, but also as the secular ruler of the city of Rome, socially he towered over the humble artist. While the relationship between Pope Julius II and Michelangelo originates in conflict over the ceiling's decorative plan, the film ends with their agreement that God's grace can be found in an experience of hope and beauty. The reconciliation of pope and artist reflected the transcendent power of the fresco *The Creation of Adam*, which brought together divine and human, and overcame the boundaries of professional norms, class, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

To further understand the audience's perception of this conflict and the incorporation of the characters' spirituality into essentially a historical "pseudo-personal drama," consider Ingrid Shafer's essay entitled "The Catholic Imagination in Popular Film and Television." Shafer described the dichotomy of Catholic and Protestant imaginations, which divide according to a preoccupation with the sacramentality or sinfulness of the world. Employing the work of Andrew Greeley, Shafer argued that Hollywood has enthusiastically embraced a Catholic language of filmmaking when focusing on the relationship between humans and the divine.¹⁶ This practice has followed the centuries-old understanding that evidence of divinity, specifically grace, is present in the world, and thus the human sphere is not exclusively a place of sin, but also goodness and transcendence.¹⁷ Greeley's work investigates the modern Catholic use of metaphor to reveal a divine presence in the world in contrast to a Protestant discomfiture with metaphor and the concomitant threat of superstition.¹⁸ Shafer described the Protestant/Catholic paradigm as dividing people into separate groups based on fundamental characterizations:

those [people] who reject, criticize, and reform versus those [people] whom adopt, adapt, and absorb; those who focus on divine transcendence versus those who focus on divine immanence; those who see the world fractured by original sin versus those who see the world connected by original blessing; those for whom God is primarily a righteous Father/King/Judge versus those for whom God is primarily a caring Father-Mother/Friend/Lover.¹⁹

Within this paradigm both Greeley and Shafer emphasize the need for both the Catholic and the Protestant imaginations to coexist in order to establish balance and maintain their respective energies.²⁰

When applying this model of the Catholic imagination to *The Agony and The Ecstasy* the initial distance between the two protagonists Michelangelo and Pope Julius II is clear. While both characters are self-described Catholics, the artist's desire to depict the physicality and emotions of Old Testament figures highlights what Shafer calls "the incarnational joy and earthiness of Catholicism," which is reaffirmed in his repeated flight from the papal court and discovery of inspiration in rural areas (e.g., the quarry at Carrara). Michelangelo's interest in the stories of the Old Testament and the physical reality that they create on the chapel ceiling marks him as a protector of the stories that Greeley identifies as the early inspiration for faith and the foundation of the Catholic imagination.²¹ In contrast, the pope's association with the authority, formal liturgy, and the politics of the Church marks him as having a more "Protestant" vision of the world in which the Christian god is a patriarchal, institutional, and judgmental figure.²² As pope Julius' understanding of God is overlaid with the political context of sixteenth-century Italy in which the Papal States are a military power, Julius represents a more worldly response to the biblical stories, protecting the institution that they represent (i.e., the Catholic Church) in the secular sphere, which is less defined by faith and more influenced by political pressures.

Late in the film the pope and artist converse before the *Creation of Adam* fresco and compare their visions of humankind and God. While Julius sees humanity as “corrupt and [...] destined for damnation” and abandoned by his Creator, Michelangelo sees innocence, gratitude, and a similarity between Human and God. The artist’s vision is imbued with a sacramentality that is blatantly absent from the pope’s supposed realism. Just as Shafer considers artists to be “sacrament makers,” Greeley’s distinction between the Catholic and Protestant response to grace found in the natural world is further explored in the papal court’s reaction to Michelangelo’s extraordinary fresco.²³ In response to the criticism of two cardinals calling the ceiling’s nude figures blasphemous, Michelangelo states that “[God] created man with pride not shame. It was left to the priests to create shame.” In depicting human nudity Michelangelo brought humanity closest to its divine origins. To the cardinals’ horror he shouts: “I will paint man as God made him in the glory of his nakedness.” This scene shows clearly how Michelangelo represents Shafer’s Catholic optimism of God’s presence in the world, while the cardinals, and the pope and elite Church generally, represent Shafer’s Protestant fear of God’s absence and humanity’s loss of divine love through profanity.²⁴

Undoubtedly it is paradoxical to assert that the pope represents a more Protestant vision, but, in opposition to the character of Michelangelo, Pope Julius is more concerned with authority and obedience than divine love. The film's climax dissipates the separation between artist and pope, who find common ground in celebration of hope for man's relationship with God. Depicted by Michelangelo in the fresco *The Creation of Adam*, this relationship combines aspects of both Catholic and Protestant imaginations, simultaneously emphasizing the individual's connection with the divine and humanity's more corporate shared inheritance of virtue and love from the Creator. Of course, while Shafer's typology is useful for illustrating the divergent perspectives presented by the film's characters, the model is not intended to be a historically accurate representation of differences between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism.

Nevertheless, the depiction of Michelangelo as an artistic genius seeking closeness with the divine has both sixteenth-century and twentieth-century reverberations that exploit the belief that artistic inspiration emerges from the soul and cannot be rushed.²⁵ Both of Michelangelo's contemporary biographers, Giorgio Vasari and Ascanio Condivi, linked soulful motivation to the artist's almost continuous patronage by the papacy and his production of artistic works with a profound spiritual attraction. In contrast, the depiction of Pope Julius II is a combination of early modern anticlericalism, nineteenth-century biography based on Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* (1550, 1568), and highlights from the Second

Vatican Council.²⁶ This event, which closed only a few months after the film's premiere, undoubtedly spurred on the film's creation and encouraged enthusiasm for Rome.²⁷ However, the character of Julius is transformed by Michelangelo's fresco in a way that is not supported by early modern sources, but which echoes the council's desire to overcome social barriers and embrace the call for holiness, particularly in lay society. The sudden accessibility of elite Catholic leaders present at the well-publicized council, and the discussion of doctrine by Catholic and non-Catholic laymen alike, made the transformation of the fictionalized pope from authoritarian possible and even appropriate to a modern audience with knowledge of the council.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65)

As the first ecumenical council since 1871, when the beleaguered Pope Pius IX adjourned the First Vatican Council (1869-70) in the face of King Victor Emmanuel's advancing army, Pope John XXIII's announcement of a new council created great interest worldwide. One of the council's most prominent themes was *aggiornamento*, an Italian word that means "updating" and that is sometimes expanded to mean reform. The introduction of *aggiornamento* into the Church at a point when the institution was not under direct siege had a broad effect that has since been hotly contested by theologians and historians.²⁸ The chief evidence of

this theme was the council's openness to groups, experiences, and ideas that departed from centuries-old Catholic tradition and otherwise would be called "modern."

In *The Agony and The Ecstasy* the character of the pope is a combination of two visions of the papacy, the traditional and hierarchical Curia of the pre-Council period combined with the warmth and humility valued in the council's initiator Pope John XXIII. The greater publicity that the opening of the council brought to the papacy humanized the pope and established him as a known figure internationally at the same time that his interest in *aggiornamento* worked to change the Curia's reputation of being closed and domineering. Conciliar historian John W. O'Malley has argued that both openness to the Catholic world outside the Vatican and to the non-Catholic world were evident in the council's immediate adoption of a "pastoral" literary style. Both in conciliar documents and in speeches to and about the council, the papacy and council leaders eschewed blunt doctrinal statements or the discussion of heresy, in favor of a style that invited readers to change their beliefs and behaviors to meet the described ideal. At only its second sitting (13 October 1962) the conciliar fathers formulated a "message to the world" that stated their intention to "emphasize whatever concerns the dignity of the human person, whatever contributes to a genuine community of peoples" in their discussions on the needs of Catholics internationally.²⁹ Over the course of its four sessions the council made a

determined effort to show the institutional Church to be more inclusive and less punishing, in order to shed its image as a closed and doctrine-bound hierarchy.³⁰

In John XXIII's opening address to the Council, he urged the assembled clergy to embrace the world's evolving needs: "Our duty is not only to guard this precious treasure, as if we were concerned only with antiquity, but to dedicate ourselves with an earnest will and without fear to that work which our era demands of us."³¹ Both John and his successor Paul VI repeatedly articulated the twin goals of *aggiornamento* and *aperturismo*. However, since the Council's close there has been substantial criticism of some Catholic communities that supposedly implemented innovations in belief and behavior under the title of the council's leadership and under cover of updating the Catholic Church. At the root of this conflict is a sense that a non-denominational spiritualism overtook and obscured the importance of accepted Catholic doctrine.³² Some critics argue that in an effort to appear kind and modern the Council produced constitutions that inappropriately modified many traditional practices and historical perspectives.³³

Whether or not this criticism has any truth, *The Agony and The Ecstasy* depicts a similar process of seeking God in both Pope Julius and Michelangelo and explores the resulting conflict in personalities and spiritual vision against the ceiling's evolving decoration. The pope's initial expectation was that Michelangelo would paint the chapel in a very traditional manner, focusing on the Twelve Apostles against a coffered ceiling, following the pope's will. However,

Michelangelo's dissatisfaction with this plan spurred him to force a new vision on the pope, which ultimately created a more equitable relationship between them based on artistic innovation and spiritual inspiration. This change from the more traditional hierarchical relationship that imbued early modern artistic patronage allowed some parity between the two men. At the film's end, when gazing at the *Creation of Adam*, Julius states that clearly God spoke to Michelangelo, even though the pope's own prayers seemed to go unheard. While *The Agony and The Ecstasy*'s narrative builds on sixteenth-century sources, it ends with an anachronistic dialogue that underlines the expectations of the modern audience attracted to a humble pope and the less authoritarian spirituality.³⁴

The Transformation of the Pope and the Second Vatican Council

The 1965 film's focus on the personality struggle between artist and pope gained verisimilitude from the contemporary discussion of the Council's two popes by the American popular press. Although both Michelangelo and Pope Julius' *terribilità* were well known to scholars of Renaissance Italy, through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the absolutist office of the pope had overshadowed the individual office-holder's personality, which contributed to the stereotype of Catholics' allegiance to papal Rome over their own political leaders.³⁵ This changed with Pope John XXIII's call for a council in 1959 and the

energy that American news magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* showed in building up knowledge of the events and personalities of the council. Far more than its contemporaries, *Time* favored an opinionated perspective that tended to create heroes and villains for ease of digestion by its readers. From the First Session (October-December 1962), *Time* identified the struggle between the progressive and conservative factions that would become one of the magazine's favorite themes in its coverage of the council, repeatedly emphasizing the Church and papacy's need to modernize.³⁶

Before the council opened, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News & World Report* had expressed mixed impressions about the pope, based on his call for *aggiornamento* but also on his more traditional injunctions privileging the rosary, using Latin in the mass, and censorship of the press.³⁷ However, in a series of articles from the end of the first session *Time* portrayed Pope John XXIII as sympathetic to the progressive faction, based mostly on the openness and warmth of the pontiff's personality. The perception of a true desire for updating the Church amongst the council's delegates inspired the editors of *Time* to elect John as "Man of the Year" in January 1963. In that issue the magazine portrayed the pope as supporting a long-ignored call for reform that lay shrouded within the Church, but generally was supported by modern society:

By revealing in Catholicism the deep-seated presence of a new spirit crying out for change and rejuvenation, it shattered the Protestant view of the Catholic Church as a monolithic and absolutist system. It also marked

the tacit recognition by the Catholic Church, for the first time, that those who left it in the past may have had good cause.³⁸

His death only months later in June 1963, at a time of continued enthusiasm for the possibilities of the Council, established him as a modern Catholic revolutionary whose work had begun irrevocable and long-desired changes within the Church. Although historians have already explored the overly enthusiastic embrace of the Council's reform agenda by *Time* and *Newsweek*, it is important to highlight their creation and perpetuation of the myth of Pope John, and its effect on North American society. While this myth depicting the Council's originator as a jolly and humble reformer was immediately popular, it was built on anecdotes of personal encounters rather than any systematic analysis of John's involvement with the council or any recognition of his conservatism on social issues (e.g., clerical celibacy or the ban on artificial birth control). The American secular press used the myth extensively in the years after John's death to measure the reforming success of the council, the initiative of his successor Pope Paul VI, and to build a vision of a new Catholicism that was far more progressive and unconcerned with denominational division than the Council proved to be.³⁹

However, there is a clear distance between the armor-wearing authoritarian pope in *The Agony and The Ecstasy* and the man that *Time* claimed "has demonstrated such warmth, simplicity and charm that he has won the hearts of Catholics, Protestants and non-Christians alike."⁴⁰ Yet the evolution of the

relationship between Michelangelo and Julius hinges upon a general softening of their personalities, and the development of an intimacy that is based on understanding and valuing a new spiritual vision unencumbered by theology. While Julius beats Michelangelo with his stick at the film's mid-point, revoking his commission and decrying his "insolence," by the film's end the pope and artist sit together on the chapel's scaffolding discussing Michelangelo's vision of God the Father. Where the pope sees an angry and vengeful deity, who is willfully deaf to some men's prayers, the artist has portrayed a caring god creating man out of kindness and love.⁴¹

Julius II [hereafter J]: "Is that truly how you see him, my son?"

Michelangelo [hereafter M]: "Yes, Holy Father."

J: "Not angry, not vengeful. Like that: strong, benign, loving."

M: "He knows anger too, but the act of creation is an act of love."

J: [...] "What you have painted there, my son, is not a portrait of god. It's a proof of faith."

M: "I haven't felt that faith needed proof."

J: "Not if you are a saint or an artist. And I am merely a pope." [...]

J: "You made Adam. And this is how you see man: noble, beautiful, unafraid?"

M: "How should I see him?"

J: "As he is: corrupt and evil, his hands dripping with blood, destined for damnation. Your painting is beautiful but false." [...]

J: "How did you arrive at this?"

M: "I had thought... my idea for the panel was that man's evil he learnt from himself, not from God. I wanted to paint man as he was first created, innocent, still free of sin. Grateful for the gift of life."

J: "The gift of life? Recently I have prayed for the gift of death. Like most of my prayers it went unheard."

Throughout this meditation on the character of God and Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* Julius is visibly weary. The pope vocalizes his social separation from Michelangelo and, seemingly, his separation from this spiritual vision of man's rapport with God: "You make a better priest than I do Michelangelo. Yet I have tried to serve him in the only way I know. If I could not do so as his priest I would do so as his soldier." In this speech historians might see echoes of early modern criticism against the papal military campaigns (1506-7, 1510-11). However, the more striking aspect is the proud pope's debasement of himself and his office, and the elevation of work by a man who was neither priest nor monk, nor social equal. Yet Julius has described a fictionalized sixteenth-century world that seems very similar to the twentieth century, in that it was plagued by secularism, personal conflict, and war.

As the pope's health deteriorates and the ceiling nears completion, the relationship between artist and pope improves and continues to focus on the ability of art to inspire deep spirituality and show a kinder vision of man and God than seems widespread in the sixteenth century. Standing beneath the finished ceiling, alone after mass, the pope reveals how the commission has transformed him and good-naturedly goads Michelangelo to acknowledge the same. For both men, the image of God reaching out to Adam had become central to their religious perspectives.

Julius II [hereafter J]: "Your memory is short, Buonarroti. I reached out my hand to you, like God to Adam, and forced you to accept life."

Michelangelo [hereafter M]: "Only your hand had a stick in it."

J: "I grant you that, but Adam was not so stubborn, not so unwilling to live as you." [...]

J: "I take no credit. I was moved by another hand. As easily and skillfully as you move your brush. Strange how He works His will. Let us share pride in having been made His instruments."

M: "It's only painted plaster, Holy Father."

J: "No, my son. It is more than that, much more. What has it taught you, Michelangelo?"

M: "That I am not alone."

J: “And it has taught me that the world is not alone. When I stand before the throne I shall throw your ceiling into the balance against my sins, perhaps to shorten my time in Purgatory.”

Notably, Irving Stone’s novel does not dwell on Julius’ transformation like the film does. Instead Stone’s pope embraces the artist’s Creator immediately prompting a version of this dialogue that avoids any discussion of man’s corruption, or the pope’s own spiritual vision.⁴² The film’s elaboration of Julius and Michelangelo’s conflicting visions also reflects the division that the American media saw among Catholics at the Second Vatican Council. American news magazines publicized this division between progressives and conservatives at the same time that Philip Dunne was writing the film’s screenplay.

In the years following his 1959 announcement of the intent to call a council, Pope John XXIII personified that progressive vision of humility before greatness, gratitude for life, and joy in the possibilities of man that the *Creation of Adam* represented. Outside the Vatican, it was John XXIII who reached out to Catholics, to non-Catholics, to the laity, and to the world by radio, newspaper, and television. As he wrote in his diary, John hoped that the council would prove to be “an invitation to spiritual renewal for the church and the world,” not merely a reiteration of past standards but an opportunity to embrace new challenges and enliven faith.⁴³

In *Time*'s profile of John XXIII as "Man of the Year," the reform-minded pope appeared in opposition to "the Roman Curia," described as "mostly aging Italians quite insulated from the modern world, they have exerted vast influence and control [...] and have looked upon any efforts to change it [the Church] with deep hostility."⁴⁴ In contrast to the men surrounding him, *Time* portrayed John XXIII as "able to leap over the administrative details and parochial interests of the papacy and confront the world as 'the universal shepherd'" and fulfill its implied desire for modernization.⁴⁵ Just as *Time* depicted John as gravitating naturally towards modern changes, *The Agony and The Ecstasy* placed Pope Julius II in a transforming and mediating role. In several scenes both the cardinals, who have definite opinions on art suitable for elite liturgical spaces, and Michelangelo appeal to the pope to judge issues related to the ceiling. Unlike John XXIII whose public profile was continuously focused on the world outside the Vatican, in implicit preference to the Curia, Julius II begins as an authoritative figure surrounded by cardinals and more concerned with the politics and finances of the Church. Only as the ceiling develops and Michelangelo's spiritual vision emerges does Julius exhibit more protective behavior towards the ceiling and its artist, engaging in discussions that reveal his wonder at and attraction to Michelangelo's less traditional and more personal vision of God the Father.⁴⁶

Just as *Time* portrayed the pope moving from an elite clerical and supposedly outmoded perspective towards a focus trained on modern lay society, *The Agony and The Ecstasy* shows the same movement. In the film Michelangelo stands as an emblem for all humankind, whose faith is founded on a more personal and spiritual perspective than the intellectual and institutionally-focused cardinals. By the time that *The Agony and The Ecstasy* appeared in theaters in October 1965, John XXIII (†1963) was the popular model of a modern pope, one beyond the transformative ability of Julius II. Moreover he was also accepted as a public example of the love of God, which ignored Julius, and which Michelangelo displayed on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. The audience could not help but connect the ideal that inspired and transformed the sixteenth-century artist and pope with the vision pursued in Rome by John XXIII.

The Creation of Adam

Art historian Paul Barolsky has examined Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* fresco as an emblem of spirituality filtered through the early modern artist's culture, which is simultaneously accessible to all humankind through its humanity and inaccessible through its perfection. With the touch of a finger God imbued Adam with life, and gave him grace within the flesh that all humankind shares.⁴⁷ Although in the context of the frescoes Adam appears as the first human, called

the universal human father by the Book of Genesis, there is no separation between Adam and the rest of humanity, for he sinned just as his descendants would. But his elevation, physical and spiritual, to the ceiling of the chapel, and the presentation of his connection with God is central to *The Agony and The Ecstasy*. Man's ability to overcome sin, interpersonal conflicts, and the world's challenges derived from his origin in God. In a similar fashion Michelangelo and Julius overcome social and professional barriers, to build a friendship based on shared seeking of God's love and wonder at God's creation of Adam.

In contrast to the marble walls of the Sistine Chapel, *The Agony and The Ecstasy* establishes Michelangelo's deep, naturalistic spirituality, in opposition to the structured religious authority of the pope. Although Michelangelo is never seen attending mass, his work personifies religious devotion and the quest for grace. The film presents Pope Julius' own reaction to the chapel and the disintegration of his spiritual vision by showing a diminished and awed Pope staring up at the painted ceiling, as though at God Himself.⁴⁸ Seeing the spiritual transformation of the pope could cause the viewer to forget that Michelangelo's ceiling roofs a chapel in Rome, at the very center of Catholic history, liturgy, and authority. The fact that the artist's work has become a touchstone for that "visible structure" might be lost on a viewer who recalls the artist staring into the clouds and seeing the out-stretched hand of God the Creator. Although director Carol Reed's biographer later judged this narrative invention to be tasteless, nonetheless

it allowed the audience to connect a traditionally Catholic story with their own spiritualized love of beauty and reverence for a non-denominational view of creation.⁴⁹ The transformation of Pope Julius, inspired by Michelangelo's fresco, encourages the film's audience to accept the possibility of change in the Catholic Church in a manner similar to Bing Crosby's films. Rather than emphasizing the Catholic Church as an institution buttressed by hierarchy and doctrine, as past councils and critics have, both *The Agony and The Ecstasy* and the council sought a more accessible vision that was characterized by the council's pastoral language, specifically identifying their audiences as "the people of God," just like Julius and Michelangelo as they huddled beneath the *Creation of Adam*.

Openness and Transformation

The same audience that had seen Pope Julius in the theater could witness via television the end of the Second Vatican Council on 8 December 1965. In his closing speech Paul VI addressed "all of humanity" in which "no one is a stranger, no one is excluded, no one is distant" from the values and embrace of the Church. While traditionally councils had guarded denominational lines ferociously, the Second Vatican Council had sidelined a public display of theological articulation in favor of changing the Church's image, returning repeatedly to a vision of an ecumenical and inclusive community that upheld

Christian values in order to ameliorate the experiences of humans across the globe. Pope John XXIII's hope of effecting *aperturismo* and *aggiornamento*, the opening up and updating the Church to the world, succeeded tremendously as *Time* showed by making him *Man of the Year* in 1963. Pope Paul VI's visits to Israel, India, and the United Nations General Assembly in 1964 and 1965 revealed that enthusiasm for the papacy and its new image was not limited by denominational bounds. The publicity that the pope and these visits attracted was intensified by the public enthusiasm for the Council's pursuit of meaningful change and connection with modern society. Just as Michelangelo's Creator extended his hand to Adam, the North American secular press described the Council reaching out to groups, Christian and non-Christian, across continents, ideologies, and classes, to heal historical wounds and empower a new ecumenical community based on human dignity. *The Agony and The Ecstasy* connected Michelangelo's frescoes with this constructed vision of a modern Church and presented the *Creation of Adam* as evidence of a spirituality celebrating the Creator's love for man, which could transform the soul of even a sixteenth-century warrior pope.⁵⁰

¹ Bosley Crowther, "The Agony and the Ecstasy (1965) – Michelangelo Film Opens in N.Y.," *The New York Times*, October 9, 1965.

² However, North Americans were not entirely strangers to the Italian Renaissance, for in 1962 Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503-19) spent several months at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, where approximately 500,000 people visited the portrait.

³ *Variety*'s review follows the same approach, offering no indication that a greater spiritual development occurs: "Against a backdrop of political-religious upheaval during the Italian Renaissance, *The Agony and the Ecstasy* focuses on the personal conflict between sculptor-painter Michelangelo and his patron, Pope Julius II." *Variety* Staff, "The Agony and the Ecstasy," *Variety*, December 31, 1964.

⁴ Unlike the film that ends with the completion of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the novel continues to the end of Michelangelo's life (1475-1564), revealing how the twin themes of love of God and love of man were seen throughout the artist's lifetime of work. However, the heavy emphasis on Pope Julius' transformation is present only in the film.

⁵ This information derives from a *Variety* report published in the 1980s; *Worldwide Box Office*. Accessed December 7, 2011.
<http://www.worldwideboxoffice.com/movie.cgi?title=The%20Agony%20and%20the%20Ecstasy&year=1965>

⁶ Frank J. Coppa, *Politics and the Papacy in the Modern World* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2008), Chapters 3 and 6.

⁷ Between 1900 and 1950 the American Catholic population rose from 10.8 million to 28.6 million, and from 14% to 18% of the total American population; Eric Michael Mazur, "Going My Way?: Crosby and Catholicism on the Road to America," in *Going my way: Bing Crosby and American culture*, eds. Ruth Prigozy and Walter Raubicheck (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 19-22.

⁸ Mazur, "Going My Way?" 22.

⁹ Notably, Bosley Crowther's review of this film was far more congenial than his review of *The Agony and The Ecstasy* and identifies the film as a specifically non-denominational story that could appeal to any audience. "Going My Way is the story – rich, warm and human to the core [...] It is the story of new versus old customs, of traditional age versus youth. And it is a story of human relations in a simple, sentimental, honest vein." Bosley Crowther, "'Going My Way,' Comedy-Drama With Bing Crosby and Barry Fitzgerald, at Paramount – New Film at Palace," *The New York Times*, May 3, 1944.

¹⁰ In his autobiography Bing Crosby emphasized the attraction of a Catholic priest who was more human and shared the interests and aspirations of his parish, even to Pope Pius XII, who sent him a letter of appreciation having watched the films several times; Bing Crosby and Pete Martin, *Call Me Lucky: Bing Crosby's Own Story* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1953, 1993), 186.

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- ¹¹ Monica Silveira Cyrino, *Big Screen Rome* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 1.
- ¹² Lloyd Llewellyn Jones, "Hollywood's Ancient World," in *A Companion to Ancient History*, ed. Andrew Erskine (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 566-568; G. Andrew Tooze, "Moses and the Reel Exodus," *Journal of Religion and Film* 7 (2003): [20-24].
- ¹³ Jones, "Hollywood's Ancient World," 571.
- ¹⁴ Bruce Feiler, *America's Prophet: How the Story of Moses Shaped America* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).
- ¹⁵ Michelangelo's biographer Ascanio Condivi confirms that the artist preferred to avoid such hierarchical patronal relationships; Ascanio Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*, ed. Helmut Wohl, trans. Alice Sedgwick (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 106. On the more traditional relationship between early modern patron and artist, as portrayed in the film, see Jonathan K. Nelson and Richard J. Zeckhauser, *The Patron's Payoff: Conspicuous Commissions in Italian Renaissance Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), Chapter 1.
- ¹⁶ Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
- ¹⁷ Ingrid Shafer, "The Catholic Imagination in Popular Film and Television," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 19 (1991): 50-57.
- ¹⁸ Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination*, 5-9.
- ¹⁹ Shafer, "The Catholic Imagination," 50.
- ²⁰ Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination*, 5; Shafer, "The Catholic Imagination," 50, 53.
- ²¹ Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination*, 4-5.
- ²² Greeley mobilizes David Tracy's *Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroads, 1982) here, arguing that "the works of Catholic theologians and artists tend to emphasize the presence of God in the world, while the classic works of Protestant theologians tend to emphasize the absence of God from the world. The Catholic writers stress the nearness of God to His creation, the Protestant writers the distance between God and his creation"; Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination*, 5. This dichotomy is in keeping with how the film depicts Julius and Michelangelo in the scene set before *The Creation of Adam*.
- ²³ "Thus, in the Catholic perspective, consciously or unconsciously, artists are sacrament makers, revealers of God-in-the-world"; Shafer, "The Catholic Imagination," 52.
- ²⁴ Pope Julius' reply to Michelangelo's outburst ("Buonarroti when will you learn respect? When you mock my cardinals you mock me, you mock the Church!") focused on the artist's disrespect towards the cardinals and the ecclesiastical hierarchy and not the issue of man's relationship with

God. The latter issue was far more important to the artist, but this disjuncture illustrates further the separation between the two characters' religious perspectives.

²⁵ Michelangelo's own letters and sonnets reflect a combination of aloofness and melancholy that was linked particularly with artists. Contemporaries considered these characteristics to be indicative of Plato's definition of poetic divine madness that allowed the soul some release from conventional life and over which the Muses presided. It was this madness that caused Michelangelo to drive away his assistants and alienate his friends and patron, while he covered the Sistine Chapel ceiling with an extraordinarily detailed narrative scheme; Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*, 95, 102, 143, note 118; Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Forgotten Books, 2008), 24.

²⁶ The film's opening shows Pope Julius' campaign against Perugia, recalling the epithet of Warrior Pope, bestowed by Desiderius Erasmus (likely author of *Julius Exclusus*, 1514) and debated by the nineteenth-century papal historian Ludwig von Pastor. Otherwise, most of the action is taken directly from Giorgio Vasari's biography, especially the scenes in which the pope and artist argue; Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, trans. George Bull, vol. 2 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 343-54; Peter William Evans, *Carol Reed* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 144-45.

²⁷ Seiberling's film review in *Life* describes the extensive roster of cultural events that Twentieth Century Fox planned to capitalize on public interest in Rome; Dorothy Seiberling, "'The Agony and the Ecstasy': The Movie is a Monstrous Mockery of Michelangelo," *Life*, November 12, 1965, 75-76, 80, 82.

²⁸ The theologian Hans Küng, although a conciliar participant, has proved to be an outspoken critic of the legacy of the Second Vatican Council; Hans Küng, *The Catholic Church: a short history*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 188. At the other end of the spectrum are Catholic Traditionalists who strive to resist change initiated by the Council through the preservation of "religious, ideological, organizational, and ritual patterns that have lost much of their institutional legitimacy in the postconciliar church"; William D. Dinges, "Catholic Traditionalist Movement," *Alternatives to American Mainline Churches*, eds. Joseph Henry Fichter and William Sims Bainbridge (Barrytown, NY: Unification Theological Seminary, 1983), 137-58.

²⁹ John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 99; Giuseppe Alberigo, *A Brief History of Vatican II*, trans. Matthew Sherry (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

³⁰ O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 43-49.

³¹ John XXIII, "Discourse *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* on the Solemn Opening of the Second Vatican Council (11 October 1962)," *Enchiridion Vaticanum: Documenti del Concilio Vaticano II*, vol. 1 (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, 1971).

³² Eugene Bianchi has noted the council's redefinition of baptism, and thus the Catholic world, to include all Christians regardless of denominational affiliation; Eugene C. Bianchi, "John XXIII, Vatican II, and American Catholicism," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social*

Science 387 (1970), 31; Ralph M. Witgen, *The Rhine Flows into the Tiber* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 1967).

³³ See Michael Davis' books on liturgical change for this perspective, for example *The Catholic Sanctuary and the Second Vatican Council* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 2009).

³⁴ Evans, *Carol Reed*, 144-45.

³⁵ For the speculation surrounding the bid for the presidency by Catholic candidate John F. Kennedy in 1960 see Thomas J. Carty, *A Catholic in the White House?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

³⁶ Patrick John Wilkinson, "The Image of 'aggiornamento' 1959-1965: the coverage of the Second Vatican Council by Time, Newsweek, and US News & World Report" (MA diss., Drake University, 1976), 32-33, 41-43.

³⁷ "The figure of the pope today seems harder to understand than ever," Special Religion Report, "The Pope Today," *Newsweek*, April 18, 1960, 75, as quoted in Wilkinson, "The Image of 'aggiornamento' 1959-1965," 25.

³⁸ "Man of the Year: Pope John XXIII," *Time Magazine*, January 4, 1963, 51.

³⁹ Even Xavier Rynne, author of *The New Yorker's* controversial series *Letters from Vatican City*, embraced this vision of John XXIII; Xavier Rynne, *Vatican Council II* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999); Wilkinson, "The Image of 'aggiornamento'", 84, 95, 103, 112.

⁴⁰ "Man of the Year," *Time Magazine*, January 4, 1963, p. 50.

⁴¹ Stone's novel presents this characterization as driving Michelangelo in this part of the ceiling: "In his darkest hours he [Michelangelo] cried out, 'God did not create us to abandon us.' [...] His God must not be special or peculiar or particular, but God the Father to all men, one whom they could accept, honor, adore. [...] God as the most beautiful, powerful, intelligent and loving force in the universe." Irving Stone, *The Agony and the Ecstasy, a novel of Michelangelo* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 462.

⁴² Stone, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, 464.

⁴³ O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 18.

⁴⁴ "Man of the Year," *Time Magazine*, January 4, 1963, 51.

⁴⁵ "Man of the Year," *Time Magazine*, January 4, 1963, 50.

⁴⁶ In *The Agony and the Ecstasy* Contessina reminds Michelangelo: "this fresco that he [Julius] has forced you to paint, come day and night to watch, defended against its critics. This work of art that has become a work of love [for the pope]."

⁴⁷ Paul Barolsky, *A Brief History of the Artist from God to Picasso* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 1-5.

⁴⁸ Notably, the film depicts Michelangelo's vision preoccupying the pope at the same time that Julius II's military campaigns fail and his body physically weakens, linking the degradation of his worldly hopes with his punishing view of the Christian God.

⁴⁹ The film's director Carol Reed employed a rather convenient conceit that allowed Michelangelo to see the Creator with an outstretched arm in the clouds, just as he would be painted on the Sistine Chapel ceiling; Evans, *Carol Reed*, 148-49.

⁵⁰ For centuries Grand Tour travelers, both Catholic and Protestant, have experienced the same feelings of awe and reverence when gazing up at Michelangelo's ceiling. In 1787 Goethe anticipated the reaction of Rex Harrison's Pope Julius, writing: "I cannot tell you how much I wished you were here, for until you have seen the Sistine Chapel, you can have no adequate conception of what man is capable of accomplishing. One hears and reads of so many great and worthy people, but here, above one's head and before one's eyes, is living evidence of what *one* man has done." Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Italian Journey (1786-1788)*, trans. W. H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 376-77.

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